

Major new development in the abortion debate

Social Issues briefing #035, 3/4/2005.

There is a lot of hearsay on abortion, there's a lot of figures bandied around, but there is nothing definite and if you're going to have a debate—and there is a debate—then you've got to have information. [*Federal Senator Ron Boswell*]

This ... will raise great anxiety amongst the health service professionals and a significant proportion of the population that remembers the bad old days when the young, poor woman was driven to backyard abortionists [*Federal MP Sharman Stone*]

On Monday night 31st January, religious leaders from major Christian denominations and from several other religions met to discuss abortion in Australia. They resolved to call upon State and Federal governments for **better data** on abortion, **better informed choice** for pregnant women, **better care** for women, and **prevention** of late-term abortion. The full text of their call is reproduced at the end of this briefing.

Australian readers may well be hearing more about abortion in workplaces and in the media. We urge you to **wholeheartedly defend, support and persuade** the people around you of the merits of the religious leaders' call upon our government. So:

- Become familiar with it.
- Talk it up in your workplace and on talkback radio.
- Write letters and emails to friends, newspapers and MPs.

The leaders' call is something to be proud of. The purpose of this briefing is to offer answers for some opposition you can expect to hear (perhaps starting with yourself).

- *'The religious right should stop imposing its view on others.'* No one is imposing anything. Although all the religious leaders concerned oppose abortion, they realise it is an entrenched practice. Better data, better information and better care for women is what they are asking for. Their call for an end to late-term abortions is not unique to 'the religious right': there is increasing community unease about this practice, because it is sometimes indistinguishable from what elsewhere we call 'child abuse'.
- *'Religion has no place in government policy.'* Religious leaders bring two major assets to this debate: their unique perspective, and their work with people. Christian religious leaders know that humanity is made in God's image, and know that Christ's incarnation reaffirms the good of foetal life. They therefore see into cultural blindspots: in this case, a runaway abortion culture that has forgotten something about how good foetal life.
- *'These men should stop telling women what to do.'* This weary objection is simply out-of-date. The religious leaders all express the greatest respect for the central place that a woman holds in every pregnancy. They seek, rather, for a culture where she is free to choose *either* way, on the basis of *complete* information about her baby, and with ongoing support *whatever* she does.
- *'Women will be driven to backyard abortions.'* So claims Ms Stone (above). But how? Better data, better care and better information is no threat to women. The spectre of 'backyard abortion' is simply a scare tactic to spook people into silence. It is not an issue any more, even it was once. Nobody wants to see it, including religious leaders. We can re-examine abortion and remain quite safe from this danger.
- *'There is no community interest in further debate.'* So also claims Ms Stone (see ABC NewsOnline link, below), and this odd claim is starting to reappear whenever the debate freshens. But it is like sticking our finger in our ears and saying 'la la la' in a crowded room. Rather, there are vested interests who don't want this debate to continue. The objection is just silly. (Also see link to Miranda Devine, below.)

- *'Government should butt-out. Abortion is between a women and her doctor.'* Of course it is—but anonymous information about existing abortion practice is no threat to that relationship. There are many areas of life that government should butt-out of—yet we also know that government is a powerful force for *setting the conditions under which* something can prosper (e.g. businesses and the economy). So it is with the raising of children: although government must leave that to men, women and families, government policies and laws do create children-friendly, or children-hostile, environments.
- *'Evangelical Christians shouldn't ally with non-Christian religions.'* There are some issues, of course, where the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ would be compromised by working with others. But not so in this case: it is a 'coalition of the willing', a collection of community leaders who find common cause. Politicians understand numbers best of all, so in a democracy, it is perfectly appropriate for people who agree on a thing to band together.
- *'Why is religion only ever concerned with "right-wing" issues?'* That complaint is certainly not true of Christianity. All of God's world matters, and supporting a rethink of abortion does not mean you have to stop rethinking the environment, the plight of asylum seekers, or nuclear disarmament. The 'left-right divide' is only perpetuated when 'lefties' refuse to participate in 'conservative' issues, and vice-versa.
- *'I'll take religion seriously on abortion when it gets more serious about other forms of death.'* So one correspondent to *SMH* declares that he'll stay pro-choice until the church gets its act together on opposing Iraq war deaths. But there is no logic to this complaint. Even if religion is slack about other forms of death, its opposition to abortion is obviously a step in the right direction. In any case, many Christians and other religious people oppose war; and those who support it do so because they want illicit killing (e.g. by Saddam Hussein) to stop. And of course, many religious groups have done all they can to help tsunami-ravaged Asians. This objection is among the silliest of all.
- *'Religion should put its money where its mouth is and offer real alternatives to abortion.'* That is already happening; and indeed, the religious leaders also agreed to set up a group that will expand and better co-ordinate existing religious efforts to care for women, both pre- and post-abortion.

We'll be pursuing this issue as it unfolds throughout the year. Now is a good time to get onboard with it!

*Andrew Cameron & Tracy Gordon,
for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

The leaders' call:

We, the undersigned, hereby call upon the Federal, State and Territory Governments of Australia

1. To enact laws requiring those performing abortions in all States and Territories to provide details of such abortions, as required in South Australia, including such details as age of mother, postcode area, reasons and gestational stage without in any way identifying the mother. Based on such mandatory reporting, the Governments thereafter to make available to the public on an annual basis accurate records and statistics on abortion in Australia.
2. To enact laws requiring that accurate and objective information be provided by an independent medical practitioner, both orally and in writing, to women considering an abortion which:
 - (a) describes the methods of abortion to be employed,
 - (b) outlines the nature of the potential health risks, both physical and psychological, to

- the mother resulting from abortion procedures,
(c) describes to what stage the foetus has developed, and
(d) which also provides for a statutory ‘cooling off’ period of 7 days between the provision of such information and any abortion procedure so that women proceed only on the basis of properly considered and informed consent.
3. To guarantee as an initial measure the protection at law of the viable foetus (after twenty weeks) in the interests of women’s health and protection of the unborn child.
 4. In the interests of patient care, to make resources available for adequate post-abortion follow-up including counselling and referral.

[*** Signatories TBA ***]

Sources/Further Reading:

Miranda Devine, “Abortion debate takes on a new life of its own,” *SMH* 3/2/2005. Online:
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<http://www.news.com.au/story/0,10117,12111662-421,00.html>

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<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200502/s1293008.htm> .

“Abortion debate back on agenda,” *AFR* 1/5/2005. Online:
<http://afr.com/articles/2005/02/01/1107020363502.html>

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